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ABSTRACT

The reliability of a taxonomy of humor was tested in two studies. The first study involved rater identification of nine categories for humorous incidents excerpted from television comedy programs (wordplay, exaggeration/understatement, contrast, audience knowledge, aggression, emotion, taboo, pratfall/slapstick, and repetition). The second study, undertaken to remedy shortcomings of the first, involved refinement of the following categories resulting from the first study (exaggeration/understatement, contrast, audience knowledge, emotion, taboo, aggression, and repetition). These categories were tested for interrater agreement using undergraduate participants trained to recognize the categories. Definitions of the categories were developed. Further refinement of the typology should result in subsuming repetition under exaggeration/understatement. A test will be developed to provide a profile of an individual's sense of humor based on their preference for humor of particular categories. (TJH)

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An Empirical Foundation for a Taxonomy of Humor

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The psychological study of humor began with Freud's application of psychoanalytic theory to the question of the importance of joking to the personality. Humor research was then largely abandoned until the recent upsurge of interest in the application of humor to health and psychotherapy. However, this recent emphasis on applied humor research does not seem to be based upon a foundation of basic research. The primary mechanisms of humor have yet to be explicated despite Freud's preliminary attempts at a comprehensive theory of humor. In order to understand the mechanisms of humor, it is necessary to begin with description and classification.

The reliability of a taxonomy of humor was tested in two studies. In the first study, humorous incidents excerpted from television comedy programs were judged to belong to one of nine different categories of humor: Wordplay, Exaggeration/Understatement, Contrast, Audience Knowledge, Aggression, Emotion, Taboo, Pratfall/Slapstick, and Repetition. One rater categorized eight hours of excerpted humorous incidents and then repeated the process

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approximately three weeks later in order to determine if the categories were defined well enough to allow for incidents to be correctly classified in the same way two separate times. Overall intrarater agreement percentages for correct matches was 72%.

A second study was undertaken in order to remedy some of the shortcomings of the first study. First, many humorous incidents use multiple humor mechanisms. In cases where more than one category was represented in a single humorous incident, the rater had to determine which category achieved a plurality in terms of importance of the mechanism to the humor of the incident.

Second, the taxonomy itself was in need of modification due to the fact that some of the categories could be combined to make the taxonomy more parsimonious. Elements of the hybrid Wordplay category were dispersed to other categories which were more descriptive of the mechanisms involved. Pratfall/Slapstick was subsumed by Exaggeration - Understatement since such actions use exaggerated movements to produce humor.

The remaining seven categories were tested for interrater agreement using undergraduate participants trained to recognize the categories. One set of videotaped excerpts (chosen specifically for their categorical purity in order to avoid problems with multiple categorizations)

were used to train participants to recognize the categories and a separate set of excerpts (also selected for categorical purity) were categorized. All incidents were clearly marked on the videotapes. Percentages of agreement on the classification of individual excerpts ranged from 32% to 80% with an average of 54%. Since there were seven categories, chance level for agreement would be 14% (one in seven.)

The seven categories are defined as follows :

AGGRESSION - Both verbal and physical aggressive acts which involve either physical contact with a person in an intentionally aggressive manner or verbal aggression. Includes racial insults, personal put downs and physical attacks.

AUDIENCE KNOWLEDGE - Anything which causes the audience to feel that they know more than the character. Includes misunderstandings between characters, audience expectations of an imminent confrontation, audience realization of the truth being hidden by a statement with a double meaning (double entendre), a secret signal from one character to another, audience knowledge of a character's true motivation which is unknown to other characters, one character being fooled by another, an action that is significant to the audience but not to at least one of the characters, mispronunciations and slips of the tongue.

CONTRAST - All types of physical and verbal contrasts (i.e., silly with serious, expected image with actual image). Includes puns, metaphors, colloquialisms involving ridiculous comparisons, switches (from what what was obviously being implied to what actually happened), reversals (of roles or attitudes or any other kind of turnabout), illogical statements, surprises (plot twists), non sequiture, actions opposite of words, animals or machines being treated like humans or vice versa.

EMOTION - All emotions exhibited by the characters. Includes embarrassment, nervous laughter, apprehension, anxiety, self-abasement, bewilderment, crying, disgust, contagious laughter and exasperation.

EXAGGERATION - UNDERSTATEMENT - Any physical or verbal exaggeration. Includes exclamations, unintentional physical contact, accidently breaking, dropping or hitting things, being hit by something, making a misstep or pratfall, any overexpenditure of energy, a physical reference to a verbalization, mechanization of human action, delay in response, use of rhythm, sarcasm, understatement, statement of the obvious, and any humor arising from an exaggerated characterization.

REPETITION - All aspects of physical and verbal repetition. Includes alliterations and repetitions of earlier statements or actions. This category can be

difficult to identify because there is often at least one other category of humor evident in an incident that uses repetition.

TABOO - Anything that is considered off-limits in ordinary conversation. Includes any scatological references, references to any body parts or body functions, gallows humor, sexual humor or any humor involving reference to any other socially taboo topic.

There were a number of difficulties which made it difficult to gain a true index of agreement for the various categories. First, it proved very difficult, especially in the medium of television to find incidents that were pure examples of only one category. It seems likely that cartoons or written jokes would provide a greater potential for categorical purity. Second, there were very restrictive time constraints placed on the participants. They were required to learn the taxonomic distinctions and rate the incidents all in the course of one hour.

One further improvement in the taxonomy was suggested after further work with the categories. It seems obvious that Repetition is simply a special case of Exaggeration so Repetition should be subsumed by Exaggeration - Understatement.

Once the taxonomy has been fully refined, it will be useful to both researchers and clinicians. A test will be

developed to provide a profile of an individual's sense of humor based on their preference for humor of particular categories. Both the taxonomy itself and the test could be useful for developing a greater understanding of the connection between physical and mental health and various types of humor. Humor researchers may be able to explain some of the contradictory findings in their research as being the result of individual differences in patterns of humor enjoyment. This taxonomy should provide the basic foundation upon which further applications of humor theory can be developed.